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# Deliberating collective action and identity: The dialectic of institutional and vernacular rhetoric in political debates on nytimes.com

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents the results of an explorative pilot study of political debates among users on NYTimes.com, the online newspaper of The New York Times. The study shows how a number of institutional and vernacular subject positions are constituted and challenged in the debates. This happens in a process characterized by a dialectic between, on the one hand, an institutional call in the technical framing and rhetorical initiation of the debates and, on the other hand, a vernacular response in the users' comments. This process reflects a community deliberating not only collective action but also collective identity and, moreover, subtly indicates the community's norms of rhetorical conduct in political debates and how they are negotiated.

**KEYWORDS:** Constitutive rhetoric, Online newspapers, Participatory web media, Political debate, Rhetorical citizenship, Vernacular rhetoric

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I present the results of an explorative pilot study I have carried out in relation to my research on online rhetorical citizenship and the debate among users on online newspapers. In this particular study, I have analyzed a number of examples of political debate from NYTimes.com, the online newspaper of The New York Times. Since it is the largest online newspaper in the world (measured by the number of unique visitors per month) and is well-known for its innovative use of participatory features such as comments sections, NYTimes.com represents a paradigmatic case for anyone interested in online newspapers that facilitate debate among their users. Broadly speaking, what I am interested in is how the institutional initiations of debate on websites like NYTimes.com interact with the user-driven exchanges that follow and, in turn, what the rhetorical and democratic functions of those exchanges may be. To steer my inquiry in this paper, I have posed the following research questions: What characterizes the dialectic between the institutional initiation of political debates on NYTimes.com and the vernacular exchanges that ensue? And what institutional and vernacular subject positions and norms of rhetorical conduct are constituted and challenged in the process? As these questions indicate, theories on vernacular rhetoric are central to my study, and in the following I briefly account for the most central aspects of these theories before I turn to analyze and discuss my case.

## 2. THE VERNACULAR RHETORIC MODEL AND THE DIALECTICAL VERNACULAR

Until now the theoretical starting point of most research on online public debate has been theory on deliberative democracy and, more specifically, Jürgen Habermas's theory on communicative action and his model of the bourgeois public sphere (Dahlgren 2005: 155-156; Hindman 2009: 7; Jensen 2003: 29-30). Perhaps not surprisingly, this research has for the most part concluded that online public debate does not live up to the ideals and standards of public debate that Habermasian theory prescribes (Dahlgren 2009: 169). Maybe this is because online public debate is indeed a problematic deliberative practice; but as e.g. Peter Dahlgren has noted, it could also be because the theoretical assumptions leading to such a conclusion have their limitations when it comes to understanding this particular deliberative practice (2005: 155-157). An alternative and perhaps more useful theoretical framework for studying online public debate is a rhetorical one. More specifically and as I aim to show in this paper, the vernacular rhetoric model of public deliberation and opinion formation seems promising compared to other models, especially when supplemented by recent theoretical contributions to the study of vernacular rhetoric in participatory web media.

The vernacular rhetoric model stems from Gerard A. Hauser's book *Vernacular Voices* from 1999. In this comprehensive work, Hauser formulates a rhetorical alternative to what he terms the rational deliberation model and the opinion poll model of public opinion (p. 83). According to Hauser, his vernacular rhetoric model differs from the two other models in a number of ways; but two important points of difference are 1) that it ascribes importance to the everyday deliberative practices of active citizens instead of focusing exclusively on the official rhetoric of institutional actors (pp. 89-93) and 2) that it places practical reasoning and common understanding as the ideal of public debate instead of rational deliberation and rational consensus (pp. 93-103). In this paper I am inspired by both of these features of the model. The first has inspired me as I have put together my corpus of texts for analysis; in accordance with Hauser's model, I have included both examples of the institutional rhetoric of The New York Times' editors, journalists, and contributors and examples of the vernacular rhetoric of the users of NYTimes.com. The second general feature has inspired me as I have done my analyses; also in accordance with the model, I have expected the examples of vernacular rhetoric included in my text corpus to perhaps be argumentatively "messy" but still of importance as a way for the vernacular actors to constitute themselves and their common world. As Hauser writes:

Vernacular dialogues (..) discursively constitute their participants' common understanding of reality. ... That these dialogues are not always noble, nor often suspend biases for the greater good, nor immune to ideological distortions is immaterial to their significance for how we monitor and attempt to influence the shape of our world. (Hauser 1999: 109-110)

Vernacular rhetoric may be cacophonous but that does not mean it is inconsequential. In addition to being inspired by these two general features of the vernacular rhetoric model, I draw on Hauser's work when I view the formal and vernacular exchanges in the texts I analyze as an ongoing societal dialogue where subject positions are constituted and challenged (pp. 103-108). However, while Hauser in relation to this writes of "speaker posi-

tions” (p. 104), I adopt Maurice Charland’s term “subject positions” instead as I think Charland’s theory on constitutive rhetoric (1987) can supplement Hauser’s theory on vernacular rhetoric in important ways.

As a supplement to Hauser’s vernacular rhetoric model, I draw on the work of Robert Glenn Howard. Over the last couple of years, he has developed a theory on vernacular rhetoric as it emerges on the Web, and recently he has been focusing on the relationship between institutional and vernacular rhetoric in participatory web media (Howard 2005a, 2005b, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). According to Howard, we should not expect institutional and vernacular rhetoric on the Web and especially in online participatory media to be clearly distinct from each other and easy to separate (2008a: 195; 2010: 241). Instead, we should expect participatory websites like NYTimes.com to be hybrids with both institutional and vernacular characteristics (Howard, 2008a: 210-211), e.g. when they, on the one hand, are initiated by institutional actors and employ institutional technology and resources and, on the other hand, allow non-institutional actors to post comments to them on everyday subjects and in an informal language (p. 197). According to Howard, on such websites there is a dialectical relationship between the institutional and the vernacular (2010: 249). But this relationship is not symmetrical; the emergence of the vernacular is dependent on the institutional, and therefore it is not possible to think of the vernacular, any less to analyze it, without invoking the institutional (pp. 249-251). As a result, in this paper I view the institutional and vernacular rhetoric on NYTimes.com as highly interdependent and focus on the dialectic between the two and, in turn, how they constitute and challenge each other.

### 3. METHODS: CASE STUDY AND TEXT ANALYSIS

In order to study the dialectic between institutional initiation and vernacular response in political debates on NYTimes.com, I have selected three different examples of such debate. The examples are all from the same week (the third week of February 2011) and on the same subject (President Obama’s budget proposal) but differ with regard to how the institutional actor (The New York Times) technically frames and rhetorically initiates the debate. My assumption is that by including such similar but different examples in my text corpus for analysis I will gain a better understanding of the dialectic in question, both in terms of the general characteristics that cut across the three examples and the particular characteristics that emerge in each individual example. As a result, in this paper I analyze and discuss an editorial and the 25 comments on the first page of its comments section, a blog post and the 25 comments on the first page of its comments section, and a panel debate consisting of an editorial introduction, six contributions from invited debaters, and the 20 comments on the first page of each contribution’s comments section. (My decision to limit my analysis to the 20-25 comments on the first page of each comments section is primarily a matter of random but necessary delimitation; but the fact that these comments often were among the most recommended indicates that many users perhaps also limited their reading the way I did.) In the following study of the three examples I analyze a) the technical framing and rhetorical initiation of the debate and b) the main subjects of debate in the users’ comments. Afterwards I discuss c) the institutional and vernacular subject positions that were constituted and challenged in the dialectic between a) and b) and d) the norms of rhetorical conduct that were reflected in the process.

#### 4. THE DIALECTIC OF INSTITUTIONAL AND VERNACULAR RHETORIC

##### 4.1 *The editorial “The Obama Budget”*

The editorial “The Obama Budget” was published both in the printed edition of The New York Times and on the paper’s website NYTimes.com. On the Web users could comment on the article the day it was published and the day after. On NYTimes.com comments to editorials are shown on a separate page (and not directly below the editorials), so in order to read the comments users must click on a link at the top or the bottom of the articles. In this sense, the technical framing of the editorials and their comments differs from blogs where user comments usually are placed directly below blog posts. This arguably has some consequences for the authority of the editorials. According to Howard, the term “blog” and related participatory features such as comments sections are associated with the vernacular authority of non-institutional communities and their valuation of dialogue over monologue (2008a: 205-207, 2010: 254-255). Conversely, since the editorials on NYTimes.com are not posts on a “blog” and their comments section are placed on a separate page, the texts maintain (some of) their traditional monologic character and institutional authority.

Overall, the selected editorial was favorably disposed to President Obama’s budget proposal but highly critical of the Republicans and their alternative plan. According to the editorial, the President’s plan was “encouraging” and “a good starting point for a discussion”, and even though the cuts he proposed reflected “tough choices”, they were “not haphazard”. This claim was supported by a point by point comparison of the President’s plan with the Republicans’ alternative. One point of comparison was e.g. education and, specifically, the Pell grant program where the editorial argued that President Obama’s proposal to reform the program was a better, more balanced solution than the Republicans’ proposal to cut it substantially. At the same time, it seems fair to say that in some cases the Republican viewpoints were misrepresented: According to the editorial, the Republicans were “obsessed” with cutting government programs “no matter the consequences” and had put forward an alternative plan that would “eviscerate” and “amputate some of government’s most vital functions”. In short, the editorial presented a somewhat substantiated argument, but it also had a tendency to distort opposing (Republican) arguments.

As for the users’ comments to the editorial, they were characterized by two main subjects of debate. The first subject was President Obama’s budget proposal or, more generally, the nation’s future budget. The users debated the President’s plan and its consequences, weighed his plan against the Republicans’, and put forward alternative suggestions. These exchanges took on a variety of forms e.g. the deeply personal narrative, the careful intellectual argument, and the humorous ironic comment. An example of how the users debated the President’s budget proposal and formulated alternatives was the comment posted by the user “Winning Progressive”. S/he criticised President Obama for “buying into the false Republican framing that deficits and government spending are our biggest problems right now” and then presented the first of several points in an alternative plan for balancing the national budget: “Taxes are currently at 9% of GDP, which is half of the average in post-WWII America. So, let’s increase that to 18% to begin with by asking the wealthy and large corporations to begin paying their fair share again.” Several other users presented similar arguments, and even though the views were many and divergent, agreement did apparently emerge in some cases, e.g. on the necessity of cutting military spending.

The other main subject of debate in the users' comments was various institutional actors. The users debated and evaluated President Obama, the Republicans, The New York Times, and several other actors. This debate was less dominant than that debate about the budget, but it nevertheless emerged in comments like the following: The user "Jane H." thought the President was "a non-serious amateur" and that the Republicans were "the only leaders (..) in Washington D.C., right now"; "pj" argued that "[b]oth the President and Republicans don't want to address the elephant in the room [i.e. entitlements], in fear of losing votes. But it is the President's job to lead on these (..) issues"; and the user "Mike Silva" criticised The New York Times for writing "moralizing editorials about the relative goodness of stupid ideas". While the comments by "Jane H." and "pj" reflected different views on what political leadership was or at least ought to be, the comment by "Mike Silva" was based on a notion of what to expect from critical journalism. Often these comments on the relative merit of institutional actors and their actions were also comments on the budget proposal – calling it a stupid idea, "Mike Silva" obviously did not approve of the President's plan – and in practice the two threads of debate, i.e. the one on the nation's budget and the one on institutional actors, intertwined.

#### 4.2 The blog post "*Obama Budget Escapes Liberal Backlash, for Now*"

The blog post "Obama Budget Escapes Liberal Backlash, for Now" was published on the blog *The Caucus* on NYTimes.com the day after the editorial. *The Caucus* is a collective blog where a group of journalists from The New York Times blog on politics and government. It is explicitly termed a "blog", and it also resembles one technically, e.g. when user comments are shown directly below blog posts. The technical (and rhetorical) framing of the blog posts on *The Caucus* and the related user comments is in other words different from that of the editorials on the same website. Drawing on Howard's thinking again, in the blog posts the balance between the institutional and vernacular is shifted towards the latter, and this can be seen as an example of how the institution The New York Times opens itself (even more) to the community authority of the vernacular (2008a: 206-207).

As the title suggested, the main thesis of the blog post was that the reaction to President Obama's budget proposal from liberal politicians, bloggers, talk show hosts, and organizations had been "remarkably muted". According to the journalist, there had been "a bit of grumbling" and "very few rants on Twitter", but all in all the statements from liberals were "tame" and "hardly a repudiation of Mr. Obama or his budget." So supposedly "the president's base was not particularly upset". This was a bit surprising: "Why would the left be so accepting of the president's budget?", the journalist asked rhetorically. In his own speculative answer, he presented several possible reasons: First of all, the fact that Republicans hated President Obama's proposal might be reason enough for liberals to love it; secondly, the President had recently delivered on some key issues for liberals, e.g. the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy; and thirdly, the apparent accept might be the result of the very disciplined communication strategy recently deployed by the President and his team, i.e. the repetition of the phrase "winning the future". In sum, the blog post invoked "liberals" as a group and interpreted how they had reacted to the budget proposal and why.

Overall, the users' comments to the blog post reflected two main subjects of debate. First and most dominantly, the users questioned the journalist's premise that silence

gave consent and his claim that so-called “liberals” had accepted President Obama’s budget proposal. An overwhelming majority of the users thought differently: “I would offer a different explanation. We have given up on Obama”, the user “FF” wrote; “Daniel Rosenblatt” concurred: “Many of us on the liberal/left wing of the Democratic party may have simply given up on the idea that the administration will ever fight for the things we believe in”; and “Isobel” agreed: “The fact that the silence is deafening doesn’t mean that ‘Liberals’ aren’t paying attention—we simply no longer expect good policy from this president.” In short, the possibility of posting comments was employed by many of the users to reject the journalist’s interpretation and explanation and instead offer a quite different take on the matter.

The second main subject of debate in the comments was the blog post’s use of terms such as “liberal”, “the professional left”, “left-leaning”, and “progressive”. Several users called these labels into question, i.e. what they meant and, especially, who they reasonably could be used to refer to. The user “PRGuy” wrote: “I’m getting a little tired of the news media talking about Obama’s so-called ‘liberal base’ when we clearly don’t have a liberal in the White House.” In the same vein “mickeyrad” commented on each of the “liberal” politicians quoted in the text: “Van Hollen is a corporate democrat – so is Barney ‘Wall Street’ Frank. Neither man is a liberal. Howard Dean is an egoist, not a liberal”. While the users in the first main thread of the debate commented on what a collective “we” thought and why, in the second main thread they debated who that collective “we” actually referred to.

#### 4.3 The panel debate “What the Budget Cuts Say About Obama”

The panel debate “What the Budget Cuts Say About Obama” was initiated in the section *Room for Debate* on NYTimes.com the same day as the editorial was published. Panel debates in *Room for Debate* consist of an introduction by an editor and a number of contributions from invited debaters. Both introductions and contributions are shown on separate pages, i.e. a panel debate includes an introductory page and a page for each contribution. Users can comment on contributions, and these comments are shown directly below the contribution they relate to. In other words, contributions in *Room for Debate* resemble blog posts on *The Caucus*, and all in all the panel debates resemble collections of blog posts on the same subject. In practice, it can be quite difficult to keep track of a panel debate across its contributions as these (and the related comments) are all shown on separate pages. For the untrained eye at least, this technical framing means that the contributions sometimes appear as isolated statements with little or no relation to each other.

In the introduction to the panel debate, the editors briefly summed up President Obama’s and the Republicans’ competing plans for the nation’s future budget: Both involved cutting the deficit, but the parties disagreed how much to cut. According to the editors, “[b]oth plans are primarily political statements, since neither is likely to be carried out without significant compromise.” Supposedly this meant that there was no sense in debating the content of the plans and what a reasonable compromise might be. Instead, the question the editors put up for debate focused on tactics and process: “How is Mr. Obama positioning himself in the battle to define his party as fiscally responsible? His plan cuts programs that liberals support (..) What do these cuts say about his political strategy or approach?”

In their contributions, the six invited debaters answered the question by critically assessing the President's budget proposal. Taking their professional backgrounds and political affiliations into account, the debaters' assessments and resulting views of the President seemed somewhat predictable, as exemplified by the divergent views of panel debaters Peter Wehner and Michael Ettlinger: Wehner, a senior fellow at a social-conservative advocacy group and former deputy assistant to several Republican presidents, called the budget proposal "deeply deceptive" and President Obama "a man on a liberal mission"; Ettlinger, a vice president at a progressive think tank, thought the proposal reflected "historic progress [on the deficit front]" and "a true commitment to creating jobs" and as a result termed the President "a tough, job-creating, deficit-reducing, pragmatist". In short, the predictability of the punditry was relatively high. Perhaps more problematic was the fact that the debaters generally took no notice of each other's contributions. Again, the contributions by Wehner and Ettlinger were a case in point: On the one hand, Wehner claimed that Obama had offered a budget "that 10 years from now adds \$13 trillion to the debt"; on the other hand, Ettlinger wrote that "the president's plan (..) will stabilize the level of public debt." Some users might be confused: How could both claims be true? These users were left wondering since the debaters never addressed each other's conflicting claims about the apparent facts of the budget proposal and its consequences and, perhaps more accurately, since the editors did not ask the debaters to do so. In sum, the rhetorical initiation of the panel debate by its institutional participants focused more on political process than substance and made use of somewhat predictable monologic statements.

To some extent the user comments to the contributions in the panel debate resembled the user comments to the editorial from the same day. Again, the two main subjects of debate were, on the one hand, the national budget or, more specifically, President Obama's budget proposal and, on the other hand, various institutional actors, especially, the six panel debaters, the President and other politicians, and The New York Times. The fact that the users posted comments on the former subject somewhat clashed with the editors' rhetorical initiation of the debate; while they were asked to debate the President's proposal as political strategy, the users (implicitly) refused to do so and debated its political content instead. As for the debate on the latter subject, in the panel debate the frequency of the comments on the subject of institutional actors was higher and the content often more cynical and polarized, as reflected in the following examples: "This is just another phony budget by another phony. There's nothing good or real in Obama's budget – or for that matter, in Obama", the user "mickeyrad" wrote in response to Peter Wehner's contribution (which, as indicated earlier, was also rather negative in its assessment of the President and his proposal); likewise, when economist James K. Galbraith ended his contribution on the note: "[G]iven the practiced lunacy of our budget debates, only a miracle – or a rebellion – will save [Social Security and Medicare]", the user "aattlee" adopted a near revolutionary rhetoric and called for action: "The American people should be massing in every public square to demand the demission of the plutocrat-Republicrat tyranny." In short, in the panel debate the user comments on institutional actors were more frequent and made use of a more heated rhetoric than was the case in the comments to the editorial, and, moreover, the users who posted them seemed to be taking their cue from the contributors, both argumentatively and stylistically.

Perhaps what was most interesting about the users' comments to the contributions in the panel debate was what they did not address. First of all, almost none of the



users actually commented on the initial question of how President Obama was positioning himself; the few who did were rather taking part in the (critical) debate about institutional actors, i.e. they debated their views of the President rather than they “analyzed” or speculated on his strategies and motives. Again, the comment posted by “mickeyrad” was an example: Even though it explicitly referred to the initial question, the comment seemed more directed at the President’s institutional character than his political tactics: “Obama ‘is positioning himself’ as the tool of big money that he became in November 2008. There’s nothing ‘liberal’ in this budget—not one item.”

Secondly, as mentioned earlier both the technical framing and rhetorical initiation of the panel debate meant that the dialogue across the contributions was in practice difficult to keep track of and in reality somewhat absent. At a glance, it seemed that such an exchange across contributions was also absent from the users’ comments; a closer look, however, reveals that many users actually did comment on several of the contributions. On average, eight of the 20 comments to each contribution included in my text corpus for analysis were made by users who commented on more than one contribution. However, there were no examples of users who in their response to a contribution referred to the claims made in another contribution. Instead, the users seemed to focus on commenting on each individual contribution or on repeating their own arguments, e.g. when the user “A Credit and Bankruptcy Scholar” repeatedly posted his or her view that military costs ought to be cut, the fourth time by simply posting the question: “Where are the defence cuts?” Even though many users were active in more than one of the contributions’ comments sections, none of them were active across those comments sections, e.g. by arresting that the invited debaters advanced conflicting claims about apparent facts. In short, one could say that the users engaged in vertical but not horizontal debate in the comments sections of the panel debate.

## 5. THE PROCESS OF CONSTITUTING AND CHALLENGING SUBJECT POSITIONS AND NORMS OF RHETORICAL CONDUCT

Of the three examples selected for analysis, the blog post and its comments section presented the most obvious example of how subject positions were constituted and challenged in the political debates on NYTimes.com. When the journalist wrote about “liberals” as a group and interpreted how they had reacted to President Obama’s budget proposal and why, he constituted a subject position characterized by certain values and attitudes, i.e. the values of the prominent politicians, bloggers, and organizations he quoted as representatives of the group and the attitude of acceptance he attributed to the group as a whole. The users in turn rejected this subject position, as they questioned not only the journalist’s interpretation of what “liberals” thought and why but also his apparent conception of who were part of the group and could speak on its behalf. Instead, they offered their own views on who made up the group “liberals” and, more specifically, what characterized the group’s reaction to the President’s proposal, namely, resignation or even despair rather than acceptance. In other words, the subject position constituted by the institutional actor was challenged and ultimately rejected by the vernacular community who instead constituted an alternative position for itself.

Likewise but perhaps more subtly, the way the institutional actors (i.e. The New York Times and its editors, journalists etc.) technically framed and rhetorically initiated

debate in relation to the editorial and the panel debate also constituted certain subject positions for the vernacular (i.e. the users of NYTimes.com) to identify with. In these examples, this happened implicitly as the institutional actors' own rhetorical actions set an example for the users to follow and explicitly as the institutional calls for action encouraged certain responses from the users. How the users did respond varied; in some cases, their actions indicated that they affirmed or accepted the subject positions offered, in others, that they challenged or rejected them.

In the editorial, the editor set a precedent for how to deliberate on President Obama's budget proposal by, to some extent, focusing on its political content and perceived consequences and by putting forward substantiated arguments in the process. To some degree, the users did the same and hence seemed to affirm a subject position oriented towards the action of deliberating the content and consequences of political proposals. In the panel debate, the institutional actors signalled other expectations of the content and form of the users' participation. As mentioned earlier, the introduction, on the one hand, invited comments on what tactical considerations the President's proposal reflected, while (the technical framing of) the contributions, on the other hand, set a precedent for offering those comments in the form of monologic declarations of unshakeable conviction. The users seemed somewhat ambivalent whether or not to accept this subject position of punditry or not. On the one hand, they turned down the introduction's invitation to comment on political strategy instead of content by simply leaving the former subject unaddressed; on the other hand, some of them adopted the heated, highly polarized rhetorical form of the contributions and thereby affirmed at least some of the distinguishing features of the constituted position.

In sum, in all three examples of political debate on NYTimes.com, the institutional and the vernacular engaged in an ongoing process of constituting and challenging vernacular subject positions. But as indicated in the analyses, institutional subject positions were also debated. On its own initiative, the vernacular community of the website's users posted comments that affirmed or challenged various institutional actors and their authority, e.g. the President, the Republicans, and The New York Times.

A case in point was the debate about President Obama and his political leadership that erupted in the comments section of one of the contributions in the panel debate. A number of users were rather negative in their assessments of the President and his ability to assert his authority and lead: "The man has the backbone of a snake", the user "mr.independent" wrote, and "DutchDumbo" agreed: "Thnx a bundle Obie, for Your weak-spined bending-to-blackmail in NOT letting the Bush tax-cuts expire." In response, a couple of users posted comments where they arrested the reasonableness of these views: "I am amazed by the posts that criticize Obama for lacking a backbone, suggesting he should stand up to the GOP or other nonsense. Were you asleep during the November election? Did you see how many seats we lost in the House??", the user "X" commented and was later supported by the user "cfarris5": "I agree with ["X"]. I am not sure how Obama can act politically in a manner that defies political gravity." These comments about ideal and realistic political leadership reflected a vernacular community debating its institutional authorities and both challenging and affirming them in the process. The power of these vernacular exchanges to (re)constitute the American presidency might seem limited; nonetheless, they ultimately addressed the question of whether or not to vote for the President and, in turn, contribute to uphold his current institutional position and resulting authority,

so they were not necessarily inconsequential. All in all, in the three examples the vernacular did more than accept or reject the subject positions offered for its identification by the institutional; it also deliberated institutional subject positions and challenged institutional actors to live up to the community's expectations of subjects in those positions.

Finally, the ongoing process of constituting and challenging subject positions reflected in the three examples also indicated what norms of rhetorical conduct the institutional and vernacular actors on NYTimes.com adhered to or subtly negotiated. In the process of deliberating what to do in a particular situation, i.e. how to put together the nation's future budget, the actors not only negotiated their respective subject positions and the authority inherent to them, but also their common norms for acting together rhetorically.

In the examples, two norms emerged as particularly noteworthy: On the one hand, the norm of what to debate, i.e. what the subjects of the political debates on NYTimes.com ought to be; on the other hand, the norm of how to relate to other debaters and their arguments. As for the first norm, both the subjects of debate selected by the institutional actors and the reactions from the vernacular community varied: The users affirmed the editorial's focus on political content by, to some degree, debating the same subject; in relation to the blog post, they rejected the journalist's conclusions but not the relevance of the subject, i.e. process, reactions, and motives; and, finally, in relation to the panel debate, the users rejected the proposed focus on process and tactics by, to some extent, debating political content instead. As for the second norm, the institutional actors set a somewhat consistent precedent of *not* relating to other debaters and their (actual) arguments, and the vernacular community mostly accepted or affirmed this practice: By not arresting the tendency in the editorial to misrepresent Republican views, the users implicitly accepted this practice; likewise, by not engaging in horizontal debate in the panel debate, they quietly accepted (the editors' facilitation and condonation of) the contributors' practice of not relating to each other's arguments or even conflicting claims about apparent facts. However, the users did challenge the practice of not relating to other debaters and their arguments in one important sense, namely, by, to some degree, engaging in vertical debate in all three examples (i.e. by relating to the debaters and arguments within a single webpage and/or comments section). In this small way, the vernacular challenged the precedent set by the institutional by simply setting another.

All in all, the rhetorical practices of the institutional and vernacular actors in the three examples of political debates on NYTimes.com reflected a set of norms of rhetorical conduct that seemed to be in a state of flux. The norms were not decided or controlled sovereignly by the institutional; on the contrary, in the comments sections the vernacular could both affirm and, to some degree, challenge the norms proposed by the institutional.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Initially, the study presented in this paper was inspired by a memorable quote by Howard about the close relationship between the institutional and vernacular on websites like NYTimes.com: "Insofar as we engage with participatory media, either by consuming or producing them, we too are the agents of their creation. Just as we are vernacular, so too are we the institutions." (2008a: 212) According to Howard, this has ethical implications: Online participatory media, e.g. online newspapers like NYTimes.com and the political debates on them, are just as good or bad as our contributions make them (pp. 211-212). However, I would ar-

gue that in order to constructively live up to this responsibility and, in turn, enact online rhetorical citizenship we as citizens need to know more about how we are constituted as political subjects in those media and how we can possibly affect or challenge those positions.

In this paper, I have sought to contribute to a better understanding of these matters by analyzing and discussing three examples of political debate on NYTimes.com. In the examples, a number of institutional and vernacular subject positions were constituted and challenged. This happened in a process characterized by a dialectic between, on the one hand, an institutional call in the technical framing and rhetorical initiation of the debates and, on the other hand, a vernacular response in the users' comments. More generally, this process of constituting and challenging subject positions reflected a community deliberating not only collective action, i.e. how they should act on a contingent matter in a particular situation, but also collective identity, i.e. who they were and ought to be. Moreover, the process subtly indicated the community's norms of rhetorical conduct in political debates and how they were negotiated.

In sum, this study has confirmed that on the Web and especially in participatory web media the institutional and vernacular are closely intertwined and, in fact, inseparable. At the same time, it has also reaffirmed the constitutive power of institutional rhetoric and, as a result, indicated that while Howard's memorable quote may be true, it may also have to be revised: Just as we are vernacular, so too are we the institutionalized. It will require further studies to settle which of the two formulations should be regarded as the most accurate; but if anything, the analyses in this study show that it will depend on how both institutions and citizens contribute to the complex dialectic of institutional and vernacular rhetoric in political debates in participatory web media.

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